

OBITUARY

Professor J. A. RYLE

JOHN ALFRED RYLE, Professor of Social Medicine at Oxford, died on February 27th, 1950.

Born in 1889, the son of Dr. R. J. Ryle of Brighton, he studied medicine at Guy's Hospital, where he was awarded a gold medal in medicine, qualifying in 1913. During the first part of his professional life as a teacher and consulting physician, his chief interest was in gastric function, about which he wrote much and was a leading authority. But as he advanced in life he became increasingly concerned with the prevention of disease; he noted the influence of social conditions on health and had much to do with shaping modern ideas about social medicine.

In 1935 he abandoned a busy and lucrative practice as one of London's leading consultants to assume the post of Regius Professor of Medicine at Cambridge. Thence, five years later, he moved to Oxford to become the first Nuffield Professor of Social Medicine. Here an active department developed under his gentle, wise and inspiring guidance.

LORD HORDER writes: I am doubtful if any man in the practice of medicine in his generation endeared himself more to his colleagues than did John Ryle. He engendered affection just as he created respect—spontaneously and permanently. A mutual friend said to me on his passing: "He was the sort of man of whom, if I could do it, I would like to write an *In Memoriam*."

When the late Lewis Smith, physician to the London, and I created a small club which we called "The Clinicals," Ryle's name sprang to the lips of both of us as the obvious first member to add to the nucleus. That must have been thirty years ago; during all this time I was privileged to be—I believe—his intimate friend.

Ryle paid me the signal compliment of asking me to guide him in regard to his

health during the last ten years of his life. It was a great responsibility. To help him to achieve his object—the foundation of Social Medicine on an academic plane—and yet to prevent him from running a faulty machine to early destruction was no light task; but it was a very honourable one. His courage, his singleness of aim, his uniform courtesy—these never forsook him.

Quoting the same mutual friend of whom I spoke just now: "He did not believe in immortality; yet he was of the quality of the immortals."

Waneth wealth and fadeth friend
And we ourselves shall die
But fair fame dieth nevermore
If well ye come thereby.

DR. W. RUSSELL BRAIN writes: The world is the poorer for John Ryle's death, and it is hard to believe that we shall not again chat with him at medical meetings or see his tall and distinguished figure standing, slightly detached and contemplative, above the hurly-burly of some social occasion. As eugenists we often know all too little of what went to the making of a man, but John Ryle's doctor father and philosopher brother provide clues to two of his dominant strains. He was a medical philosopher and, like many rationalists, a religious man. Though he drew the line between appearance and reality in a different place from the orthodox, he possessed a world of values which exacted from him a service perhaps all the more devoted because he did not believe in any other world than this. He was a pilgrim, too; and his quest led him from a large consulting practice to the hope of research at Cambridge, thence to blitzed London in the war and finally to social medicine at Oxford. In his life journey he accomplished much for medicine, but his friends will remember him best just for being John Ryle.

PROFESSOR L. J. WITTS writes*: By the death of Professor J. A. Ryle the medical profession has lost a leader who lived close to the Hippocratic ideal. Once, when he was travelling down the Wye in a canoe, a boy looking over a bridge shouted, "Here comes Gandhi!" The remark was truer than he knew. Ryle had a transparent honesty and serenity, but he had a vein of asceticism which grew in strength through the years.

John Alfred Ryle was born at Brighton in 1889, the third of a family of ten children. His paternal grandfather had been Bishop of Liverpool. His father was a doctor who had become a rationalist during his medical training. Ryle himself was a rationalist, and his faith was expressed in the little book *Fears May Be Liars* which he wrote during the second world war. Ryle went to Guy's, like his father, and by the time the first war started he had carried out with Izod Bennett the studies on the fractional test meal which made his name famous. He served from 1914 to 1919 and quickly showed the ability in recognizing and describing clinical syndromes which was one of his great gifts. His subsequent career fell into three phases. The first was the Guy's period, from 1919 to 1935, during which Ryle consolidated his reputation as a clinical scientist and consultant. Tall, fair, and handsome, he was popular with doctors for his diagnostic skill and with patients for the reassurance of his voice and presence. He was an able lecturer, and the fruits of this period of research and practice were collected in his book on the *Natural History of Disease*. He had intense respect for the value of the individual, and emphasized the study of the patient as a whole. He was a keen eugenicist, much interested in the interplay of heredity and environment. He deprecated undue reliance on laboratory investigations, and advised restraint in any form of human experiment, whether in new treatments or in clinical scientific study. When he was being driven to hospital or to a consultation, he sat in the back of his car and read, nearly always from one of the old

clinicians such as Sydenham or Hilton and rarely from a current journal. His conservatism was sometimes excessive, particularly as his impressive and persuasive manner endowed even his less considered judgments with weight. When the Americans introduced the liver treatment of pernicious anæmia he exclaimed, "What will they be doing next!"

Ryle's career seemed firmly charted for the positions of senior physician to Guy's, leading London consultant, and President of the Royal College of Physicians. To the general surprise he turned aside and accepted the Regius Chair of Physic in Cambridge in 1935. For some time he had been becoming more socialist and pacifist in outlook, and it may be that the life of a successful consultant no longer gave him the satisfaction without which its ardours are insupportable. For a while, however, Ryle seemed to have lost his way, and these middle years were his least productive period. It was partly that the set-up of the clinical school at Cambridge was unsuitable, for any system whereby a distinguished professor teaches or researches on colleagues' beds on a permissive basis is unlikely to work well. Moreover, Ryle was not a clubbable man and he disliked college life and entertainments. Cambridge between the wars had a large enough left wing to have enfolded him happily, but it was never his way to take the smooth with the rough or to realize that there are occasions on which it is meet to make merry and be glad even though the Yangtze is overflowing its banks and children are starving in Spain. How different from his predecessor, Langdon Brown, who, when the Germans irrupted into the Low Countries, said, "Come, let's go and have a good dinner, it may be the last we shall eat!" Early in the war Ryle stood unsuccessfully for Parliament, where his talents would surely have been mis-spent. When war came again in 1939 he walked his garden in an agony of suspense before deciding that resistance to Fascism was more important than strict pacifism. He then drove himself hard in the struggle, both in East Anglia and back at Guy's in

* We are grateful to Professor Witts and to the Editor of the *British Medical Journal* for permission to reprint this appreciation.

the blitz, and in 1942 he had his first coronary thrombosis.

In 1943 he was invited to the Chair of Social Medicine at Oxford, and entered on a lustrum of great happiness and productivity. He had at last found the destination for which he had so long been searching. He knew that his expectation of life was diminished, and frankly regarded himself as a St. John the Baptist, preparing the way for the gospel of social medicine. He built a successful department and wrote a series of lectures on social medicine which were published in 1948 under the title *Changing Disciplines*. This book was well received. In it Ryle gave precision to his ideas of social medicine as a practice and as a scientific discipline; it will be for the future to decide how long these two horses can run in harness together. In spite of ill-health he travelled widely, to India, America and South Africa. Many visitors came to see him at Oxford, and his fame was now greater than ever. A minor hypertensive attack in 1948 did not deter him, but in the summer of 1949 he had a severe coronary thrombosis from which he never recovered. He met his illness with remarkable tranquillity and continued to write poetry, which was one of his less familiar avocations. He was, indeed, a radiant spirit who showed what a luminous quality scientific humanism can possess, and his death is a personal bereavement to very many people, the loss of one to whom they turned when they were fretted by the cares of this world. He leaves a wife and five children to whom he was greatly devoted. He had the satisfaction of seeing two of his children qualify in medicine and two in science, while the fifth is nursing.

DR. C. P. BLACKER writes: Ryle's awareness of the influence of environment on disease did not prevent his recognising the importance of inborn factors. Quite the contrary. In the year 1927 he became a member of the *Eugenics Society*, and in 1930 a member of the *Society's* Council; between 1938 and 1940 he was one of our vice-presidents. In 1938 he delivered the annual Galton Lecture, his title being

Medicine and Eugenics.* The designation perfectly expressed the speaker's underlying thought of which we may remind ourselves after a lapse of twelve years:

I was recently asked, said Ryle in his Galton lecture, what I considered the goal of medicine to be. As an active clinical physician concerned with diagnosis, the teaching of signs and symptoms, and the patching of individual lives, he suspected, perhaps, that I might reply—"the curing of disease when possible and the relief of suffering when cure is out of reach" or words to that effect. I replied, in effect, "the preservation of and the planning for the greatest possible health, happiness and efficiency for the greatest possible number by prophylactic measures, including eugenics and social reorganisation."

Later in the address, Ryle said:

At heart I am a cautious person and my problems are approached as a rule, I believe, judicially. But there are times when I grow impatient with the lack of idealism among those scientific and social and political workers whose concern is, or should be, the improvement of man's lot. There are too many ills which we know how to prevent but are not as yet preventing.

These two quotations throw light on Ryle's philosophy. Though he had been for most of his professional life a consulting physician of the highest distinction, the aspect of medicine he stressed was neither the curative nor the palliative but the preventive; and he was impatient (though no man showed impatience less than Ryle) of procrastination in applying, for the relief of suffering, the knowledge which science had gained. Delays and indifference here he called lack of idealism.

It was just this idealism which moved him from one of the most successful practices in London to Chairs at Cambridge and then Oxford. Yet his idealism was not facile; he did not believe, as some exponents of social medicine seem to believe, that human beings were the creatures of their environment, hereditary endowments being negligible. For him prophylactic measures, including eugenics, were the goal of medicine. Indeed, Ryle's Galton lecture ended with a three-fold plea. The first item was "that there should come into

* *EUGENICS REVIEW*, 1938, 30, 1.

existence a national council embodying a triple alliance between medicine, eugenics and sociology." This striking suggestion makes clear the importance he gave to eugenics. Unobtrusively, he devoted much time and sympathy to the affairs of the *Society*. He was an original member, in 1931, of our Committee to legalise voluntary sterilisation; and he was chairman of a small advisory group, formed in 1932, to help me with the editing of *The Chances of Morbid Inheritance*. The group used to meet at his house. Indeed, this volume owes its existence to a suggestion first put forward by Ryle that there was need for a simple book to guide the general practitioner on how to give eugenic prognoses, and that the *Society* should sponsor such a book. Mrs. Newfield would wish me to mention Ryle's boundless goodness to her husband throughout his illness. To me, also, he has more than once been a staunch friend, whose kindnesses will never be forgotten.

How shall we remember John Ryle? Some people are complex, subject to the tensions of contradictory and opposite impulses, inconsistent and unpredictable; from internal conflicts and a striving for synthesis, subtlety, profundity, and rarely genius may emerge. Ryle was not like this. His character was one of remarkable simplicity; gentleness, serenity and dignity were its keynotes. His essential goodness and his transparent honesty were plain at first impact; one's first impression of him was the right one; to get to know him was to appreciate the depth and scope of qualities one had apprehended in one's first impression.

The first time I saw him was twenty-seven years ago when, as assistant physician, he was doing a teaching round in a medical ward at Guy's Hospital. At that time I was a junior ward clerk attached to another firm. I gave up what I was doing to listen. I noticed how he began by reassuring the sick man, chatting with him for a few moments before entering on the medical discussion, how he handled the student responsible for the case, and how he later passed from the particular to the general.

I clearly saw how clinical teaching could be an art. Here was a man, I said to myself, from whom I would like to learn medicine.

A few years later I was dining at his house when, contrary to his habit, he allowed himself to become involved in a conversation with a patient, an ex-nurse, who cross-examined and harassed him with numerous repetitive questions, and would not let him go. He answered her unhurriedly, with perfect courtesy and unruffled calm. "Doesn't he ever get annoyed?" I asked Miriam, his wife, as the telephone conversation was prolonged: "Don't such people ever exasperate him?" "He is now," she said, "showing as much annoyance as I have ever known him show."

Ryle was himself a member of a large family. He once quoted to me a remark of his father to the effect that the best start in life which a man could give his son was to provide him with plenty of brothers and sisters and to leave him sufficiently little money to compel him to earn his own living.

Ryle combined gentleness, tolerance and understanding with a serene and reflective detachment reminiscent of classical antiquity. Indeed, there was much of the ancient Greek about him—his tall, athletic and erect figure, his handsomeness, his abstemiousness, his fresh complexion. He was interested in the Stoic philosophy and himself embodied some of its central teachings. "You will suffer in your friend's suffering," says Epictetus. "Of course you will suffer. I do not even say that you must not groan aloud. Yet in the centre of your being do not groan."

"ἔσωθεν μέντοι μὴ στεναῖης"

"It is very like," comments Gilbert Murray,* "the Christian doctrine of resignation. Man cannot but suffer for his fellow man; yet a Christian is told to accept the will of God and believe that ultimately, in some way which he does not see, the Judge of the World has done right."

In a book published nine years ago† Ryle discussed the question of immortality.

* *The Stoic Philosophy*, 1915. Watts & Co.

† *Fears May be Liars*, 1941. Allen & Unwin.

He did not hold orthodox views about survival; the atoms, he contended, which compose our bodies survive; so do the genes which we hand on to our children; and so does the influence which we impart to those around us. But the personality, he believed, is extinguished at death.

"Time and space," he wrote, "have synthesised us and in dissociation will use us again for other and perchance more splendid syntheses. In such an immortality

of world and fact there is much for wonder, and is there anything for despair, resentment, or for dread?"

Time and Space, in Ryle's context, mean much the same as the Will of God in Gilbert Murray's. Indeed, they *are* the same. As Lord Horder's friend said: "He did not believe in immortality: yet he was of the quality of the immortals."

He is survived by his wife and five children, to whom we extend our sympathy.

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